BILLY-BOY

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JESSIE
WILLCOX
SMITH

BILLY-BOY

A Study in Responsibilities

by JOHN LUTHER LONG

Author of "MADAME BUTTERFLY," "THE DARLING OF THE GODS," *etc.*

With illustrations by JESSIE WILLCOX SMITH *and Decorations by* ROBERT Mc QUINN

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By JOHN LUTHER LONG

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FOR UNWISE FATHERS
AS IF FROM THEIR (SOMETIMES)
WISE SONS

MR. LONG TAKES PLEASURE IN ACKNOWLEDGING THE COURTESY OF "COLLIER'S WEEKLY," BY WHOSE PERMISSION THE TEXT AND THE ILLUSTRATIONS WHICH MAKE UP THIS BOOK ARE HERE USED

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	Once there was a Happy Little Boy	1
II.	Who did n't want Flowers . .	7
III.	Who made me say Good-Night through the Crack of the Door	15
IV.	Who made me ashamed of Killing	23
V.	Who became my Judge . . .	37
VI.	Who twisted the Knife . . .	45
VII.	Who took me Home with him	65
VIII.	And took the Chair from behind the Door	71

ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece

Page

I found that Billy had put a chair under the lock 17

He put it into my hand . . . so tenderly . . . that for the first time I began, perhaps, to understand 27

It was "arms all 'round" 49

Billy-Boy

ONCE THERE WAS A HAPPY LITTLE BOY—

ONCE there was a happy little boy with whom I went away to spend a summer by the sea. I took my new automatic gun, the mechanism of which was very fascinating to him, but the purpose of which he did not understand. By a singular oversight, I neglected to explain that it was a machine for killing birds. He took nothing but a butterfly

net. We made the most tremendous plans for sport.

He told me valiantly that not a butterfly in the whole world should escape his net. I told him as bravely that not a bird on earth should escape my gun. He looked puzzled at this, I think, but he was so full of the joy of the sea air and the rushing train that it passed.

We could not wait to get out. However, on the first day the wind was from the east, with a high tide, so that there were no birds on the beach. But we found for him a splendid pitcher-plant, and he was charmed with it until I told him, ineptly, that it was carnivorous, and explained

that its cunning pitcher-leaves were traps to catch unwary bugs and drown them, and then, when they had decayed, to absorb them for food.

The little boy was shocked, and I laughed at this and hugged him. "It looks bloody — beastly," he said. "I don't want it!" I agreed with him, laughing again, that it had a monster look and threw it aside.

The next day was a good one for birds. I got a bag full. But the little boy was nervous and excited during all the hunt, took nothing with his net, and on the way home complained of headache. He would not let me touch him and rejected all my offers

to get him flowers. He would have no butterflies caught.

When we reached home he was more ill and went at once to bed. I left him with the promise that the next morning we would hunt together, and that more attention should be paid to his net. I apologized for having been too busy that day with the birds. I fancied that this was the cause of his strange humor — my neglect of him — and why he repelled my caresses.

But the next day he was still languid and preferred not to go. I left him at home and returned to hear him singing — until I arrived with my bag, once more full, when his song ceased.

I told him cheerily that he must be well on the morrow, for all that day his wishes should rule and we would return with as many flowers and butterflies as birds. But he did not rise to my cheer, and again I noticed that, when I touched him, he drew away.

And then Billy-Boy was distinctly ill the following day, and so for several days, while what I thought his strange aversion to being caressed remained. Yet, again, he was well enough to go reluctantly with me, though he again returned with his headache and the "strangeness"—as we had agreed to call it.

And so it went on, Billy going only

when I urged — commanded, indeed — and less and less often even then, until the little boy remained in bed for days together, and the unwise doctor came — the doctor who sees and understands only the body and thinks only of his drugs.

WHO DID N'T WANT FLOWERS —

I FANCIED a case of heat exhaustion; but the doctor insisted that there was not a symptom of it. Of course, the physician asked Billy where it hurt him, and, of course, the brave little boy answered, "Nowhere." And, of course, with equal fatuity I insisted that it *must* hurt him somewhere and that he *must* tell the doctor. I remember how Billy-Boy opened his sick eyes and looked at me. I did not understand it then, but I do now. He was asking me in that look how it

was possible that *I* did not understand where it hurt him.

I wish there were doctors who could see a little further than the tongue and the pulse! But then why should they when a father does not?

He spoke of slothful circulation — listless something — and advised fresh air. I was to let him rest a day or two more; then, perhaps, he would *wish* to go out. If not, I was to induce him — tempt him — to go: it was the sunshine he needed. So said the wise doctor.

All this I did, but he still shrank from going out with me. Then I pressed the temptation.

"Yesterday," I said, "I saw a patch

of wild white violets as big as this bed!"

For a moment I succeeded. All Billy's boyish joy leaped into his small face. He sat up in bed and cried: "Oh! Where?"

But his hands had fallen upon me at that moment and he relaxed; the joy fled from his face and he lay inertly down again.

"If you won't go for them I will bring them to you," I persisted, knowing how this would further tempt him. "Bushels of them!"

"No!" he cried suddenly. Then, with a little remorse: "I don't want any flowers, papa."

"What!" I cried in real amaze-

ment. "Billy-Boy, the lover of the flowers! The beloved of them!"

"They might be alive," he answered. "I have been thinking. And if you were alive, and some one stronger than you was to press the life out of you with flatirons, how would you like it?"

I exploded with laughter — happy to discover, as I fancied, that Billy's illness was not of the body but of the strange, beautiful little mind, and could be easily cured.

"Billy-Boy," I said, "boys are just like men. If they are allowed to mope in bed and in the darkness when there is sunshine without, they fancy and even *see* strange things — things which

out in the fair daylight, where the dear birds sing, and the lovely flowers bloom, they will know to be not only untrue but very foolish."

And all Billy answered was: "Did you say the *dear* birds, papa?"

"Why, yes. Nothing on earth is so exquisitely made and adjusted as the mechanism of a bird."

"I don't see how you can say that! — *talk* so nice!" sighed Billy, willing to drop the whole matter.

Now, at that moment, the consciousness that Billy did not quite like me any more, which had kept me often awake, came very poignantly. Of course, you didn't know Billy, and you can't fancy how serious a matter

it was to be not liked by him and to be confronted by the possibility of his actual dislike.

"Flowers are not alive, Billy-Boy," I said with, I fear, a bit of a tremor in my voice. "And God meant them for just what we use them — to take joy in their beauty and perfection and perfume. And so it is with all the inferior things and creatures on this earth. They are for our use."

"Who says so?" asked Billy.

I had to evade this innocent question.

"This morning," I faltered on, "I bagged twenty ring-necks and lost four, because Billy-Boy was not there to rush into the raging surf and get them.

And, to show you just what I mean by the 'use' of the inferior creatures for our good, to-night we will have them for dinner, and Billy shall have as many as though he had helped to kill them."

"No!" he cried again in sudden terror. Then, as if he regretted it: "Papa, I don't like to eat birdies. Mebby you are right, papa dear, about—thi—things, but you won't be angry if I don't eat"—he choked in his throat—"birdies?"

"Why, no, Boy," I cried. "You are all the boy we possess, and you are to have and not to have everything you like or don't like, as long as you live!"

This generosity was tragic for the little boy. He said: "Papa dear, tomorrow I *will* go with you. But that pitcher-plant *was* beastly!"

"Yes," I laughed, "that was."

WHO MADE ME SAY GOOD-NIGHT THROUGH THE CRACK OF THE DOOR —

SO the next day we went. He took a portfolio for flowers, but no net; I took my gun. And we started very happily. As the unwise doctor had said, the sun did get into the soul of the little boy and our chatter happened to be of safe and joyous things. But we had not been long together when I knew once more that Billy-Boy was aloof — that he feared something. I think it came forth sharply at the first kill — though

I did not know it then. Billy cried out and ran away and sat on the hills far off with his face turned from me. When, later, I went to him, he was lying face down, hiding eyes and ears, and his portfolio had fallen neglectedly at his feet. He had no flowers.

I had come softly, and when I touched him he cried out suddenly in terror of me also. He made no explanation of this and begged to go home. I said that we would start in a little while — that I had seen a bunch of birds too easy to go away from. He answered brusquely that *he* was going home, and ran rapidly away without me or a look or good-by for me — a strange thing for gentle Billy to do.

"I found that Billy had put a chair under the lock"

When I got home Billy was very ill. "Papa," he called through the door, "don't come in, *please*. Say good-night through the crack. I am very, very sleepy and don't want to be 'sturbed."

"But, Boy dear," I said, "I *must* kiss you good-night. That has happened every night since you were born; and I should be very unhappy if it did not happen to-night. Would n't you be unhappy?"

"No," said Billy.

When, after a moment, I had recovered from the shock of this, I pleaded:

"But you are not asleep, Boy!"

I tried to enter, and I found that

Billy had put a chair under the lock which absolutely prevented me.

"Don't!" he almost shrieked as I persisted. I went silently away.

If you have never had a Billy-Boy you will never understand how this hurt. Nothing in all my life, I think, had hurt so much. I could not have spoken to Billy again, just then, without betrayal. But presently I came back. Billy must not know that he had hurt me. For that would hurt Billy more.

"How is it now?" I asked.

"The same, papa," said Billy.

"I am not to come in?"

"No, papa dear."

"All right, Boy," I said. "Good-night — sleep tight."

"Papa," came a little sad voice through the door, "Billy's sorry."

"Yes," I said, "of course!"

"That he runned away from you."

"Yes."

"I was 'ick, papa!"

"Of course. Billy would n't run away from his papa unless he was sick."

"Honist!"

"I know. Honest!"

"Night-night, papa!"

"Night-night, Boy!"

I waited a long time. Billy might relent. This was worth waiting for. But there was nothing more. Do you

observe that with it all — the illness, the sleepiness — Billy simply did not want me in his room?

I stole like a thief from the little boy's door. And all that night I waked and wondered what it was. You would have waked and wondered too. One does not lightly lose a Billy's love. Twice I crept back. The first time Billy-Boy was crying softly. Was it for me? The second time he was safely asleep.

It was late when he woke, much more ill, and by that time the doctor was once more there with his prescription of air and sunshine.

Why is there no thermometer to test the temperature of a child's soul?

WHO MADE ME ASHAMED OF KILLING—

MORE wise talk on my part and more desperate penitence on Billy's part, when he grew better, and we again went out together. But it was now so plainly a matter of duty for Billy that we both recognized the folly of concealing it. He frankly sulked. And I confess that for the first time in Billy's short life, I was impatient with him. He knew this more and more as the day progressed and was piteously exact in his attention to me and the birds. He

even tried once or twice to take my hand. But he never succeeded in more than getting the tips of my fingers — and that for but an instant at a time. I hunted doggedly on.

Two birds rose before us. The rage of the hunter came. They were within good range. I threw up my gun and fired. One fell and fluttered on the ground a moment, then lay still. The other, evidently hit, gave a piteous little cry, circled blindly for an instant, then flew lamely toward the sea. I fired the second barrel, and the already wounded bird dropped heavily into the surf and fluttered impotently there.

Two more came into range.

"Billy," I cried, with my eyes on the coming two, emptying and refilling the barrels, "get the one in the surf!"

I fired at the other two — both barrels — and missed entirely.

"Billy!" I cried angrily. "The bird!"

I can see lovely little Billy now! He stood there, in the glorious, flooding sunshine, motionless, with his hands tight over his eyes! His pretty pink legs had been made bare for the surf! His tiny sleeves were pushed up! But the rage of the hunter was upon me — and, added to that, was the rage of a fair miss.

"Billy," I cried, with brutal ferocity,

"get that bird before it goes out! Go! It will get away!"

Billy drove himself into the surf and brought me the fluttering little creature. He put it into my hand with his two — so tenderly, with such terror and choking pity, that for the first time I began, perhaps, to understand.

And, again, I have a picture of my Billy where it will never fade — where it will always make and keep me gentle. The spray had dashed upon his blond head and sparkled there like pearls in the diadem of some young and very fair god. His bare legs and arms shone with the cool salt water. It dripped from the two small hands which held the dying bird. I cannot

"He put it into my hand . . . so tenderly . . . that for the first time I began, perhaps, to understand"

tell you of his eyes. But I see them now! There was that in them which I knew had not come from the sea! And that in his breathing which I knew did not come from the air!

As I took the throbbing creature from his hands I knew that I had lost Billy forever! Though I did not know why, quite — I did not understand yet, quite — why I was a felon in his pure intelligence.

"What is the matter, Billy-Boy?" I asked guiltily. "Why do you tremble? Why is your face so white? And why did n't you want to get the bird?"

"May I go home?" begged Billy.

"No. I want to know first why you hate me."

"I don't hate you," said the little boy, "yet."

The wounded bird fluttered out of my hand and fell upon the ground. I put my foot hastily upon it. Billy's "yet" had taken away my breath.

"Take your foot away!"

It was a stern command from Billy and I obeyed it. But instantly I was angry, both at myself and Billy — for his autocratic command and my craven, involuntary obedience to it. I reclaimed the bird from him savagely.

"Turn your back! It is wounded and must not be left to suffer. I will kill it. Be silent!"

But my own command was the desperate expedient of the convicted.

It was nothing like imperial innocent Billy's. Nor was it so obeyed.

"Let me have it," begged Billy, chokingly. "I can cure it!"

I laughed — but far from happily.

"Nothing — nobody can cure it!"

"Anyhow, it is better for it to die than to be killed."

O wonderful distinction!

"This is more merciful," I said, but I could not proceed to execute my easy kind of mercy.

"But it is your fault, papa. You hurt it, and now you want to kill it *'cause* you hurt it. And it's only a helpless little bird that couldn't hurt *you*."

Taking advantage of one's own

wrong has never had a more powerful or personal demonstration.

Billy caressed the little, ruffled, bedraggled thing in my hands, speaking a sort of language to it that I did not understand, but which I think the dying creature did. At least I hope so; and I hope that when I die Billy will be able to speak as lovingly to me, and that I shall understand as well.

But among other things I heard Billy saying:

"This was the *first* shot, birdie dear — the poor little wing. That was the time you cried out. Billy had to hide his eyes then! Oh, but *did n't* it hurt us! This was the second shot

— this is the dear little neck — when you thought you were safe at sea! And that hurt more. Oh, it was n't nice to hurt a little birdie already hurted."

And then into my soul Billy put the knife and turned it.

"See how it pains him when I touch that wing!" Billy's touch, to give pain! "And, oh, papa! feel its dear little heart beat! Papa — you did it."

I felt it now — that small heart — I had not before. It would go wildly for an instant — then so slowly that it was lost.

"Billy," I begged, now reduced to that, "I *must* kill it. You must let me. Turn your back. You are too young

to understand. I must!" and I was sick at heart because I must. "Take care! You will soil your clothes with the blood."

"I don't care — I don't care!" cried the little boy. "Give it to me! It will live a *while* longer, anyhow!"

"Billy, we must be merciful to the little bird and kill it," I insisted, hoping that *he* would do it — lovely Billy — yet frenzied with fear that he might!

But it was useless to try to make Billy understand such a fearful philosophy as that — Billy, who had not his philosophies from earth, but heaven, I think. I did not understand it myself just then.

"They don't kill *people* who are hurt. They try to cure them," said Billy.

"But, Billy, this is only a little bird!"

"And you are a big man!"

It was Billy's ultimatum. And he had better have called me a monster torturing a pigmy. There was no answer to it. What was I to do? There lay the bird in my palm, gasping through the shot-holes in its neck. It was useless to tell Billy again that nothing could save the small life, that it had but a minute more of existence.

"Papa, ought n't we be kind to it? We hurt it!"

Do you observe that he said "We!"

I think I was becoming a bit hysterical. But I shall call it simply impatience. Then I found myself angry at the cruel position into which Billy had at last forced me.

"Turn your back!" I cried savagely.

Billy did this, and I killed the bird and threw it up on the bit of a hill where Billy had used to sit. When I turned, with the very guilt of a felon inside and my hands red with what Billy had first made to seem innocent blood, to face the most relentless judge in the world, Billy was gone. I thanked God for it.

WHO BECAME MY JUDGE—

I HAVE never shot another bird. I have since tried to kill no living creature. For, whatever may be its form, it has within it that wondrous thing which God alone can give and perhaps—who knows? — ought alone to take—life. And the little boy and I go out together once more. At first he was very shy of me. He understood, I think, that he had judged me with too stern a justice — for his years and mine. And, while I am sure that he did not regret it, for he must have had an almost celestial obsession of its

justice, he, I am also sure, rather felt that he had exercised powers not yet confided to him. Then, perhaps, too, there might have been something of the sensation which a judge must feel who finds himself compelled to intimate relations with the ex-convict he has made — but who has pledged reformation. I think no one quite knows what a judge's attitude ought to be in such a case. It is, to say the least, embarrassing to both. Again, Billy may not have been as certain of my reformation as I was. I had not spoken. I was both hurt and ashamed before my serious little boy. I felt that he should have trusted my superior wisdom. Indeed, the only surety Billy

could have in those later days was that I never took my gun along when we went out. But even that I had not omitted at first. I was too proud to at once admit my conviction and reformation. At first I would carry my empty gun with me and come home whistling, as though it were the most natural and inspiring thing in the world for a hunter to carry an empty gun on his shoulder and never hunt. And then I fancied that I was not half as bad as Billy thought me. I had always hated to kill wounded birds. Every hunter does. But what was one to do? There stood that law of the hunter and the hunted, that a wounded animal must be killed so

that it might not suffer. And Billy had no business to think that I took pleasure in this.

Of course, it was good to know that since my retirement from active hunting Billy had ceased to be so ill. Perhaps you will observe between us a bit of that heredity which should have made us very intimate comrades. For neither was inclined to unbosom until time should do its perfect work in showing him his folly. But the fact is that I had about reached that point in my temperament. I knew now that I could have Billy's love back for my confidence, and I knew that he was waiting for it. But I was not yet sure that he — little Billy —

was entitled to this from me — big William — his father.

Nevertheless then, that sensation — have you ever known it? — that your little boy is at your side, but that you must not touch him — to understand that he is probably wondering whether you have no courage, to have the suspicion, finally, that he may be better and bigger and braver in his little heavenly unwisdom than you with all yours of the world? All this persisted steadily.

Said Billy one day, just to show you how clairvoyantly he understood:

"Papa, we have n't 'confided' much lately, have we?"

"What 's that?" I asked cunningly,

knowing perfectly what he meant, but exercising the convict's wariness.

"Don't you know how you used to tell me that I must tell you — or some one — all my troubles?"

"Yes."

"And that then I would always feel better?"

"Yes."

"And that it hurts the nice clean heart to keep nasty things in it?"

"Yes. What have you to tell?"

"Nothing, papa dear — *I* have n't anything."

We were not walking close as of old on this day. He still was not sure. How could he be? He must still have felt that barrier between the

convict and the judge. I suppose he had made it clear to himself that our hearts must be cleaned out by my initiative — according to my own teaching — and could only be in that way. And the whole case — the purpose, the repentance, the forgiveness — must be put into direct words for his pure young soul. Certainly he could not ask me whether I — in his own understanding of it — meant to go on murdering little birds; whether this were only a temporary cessation of my criminal instinct! That was for me.

The fact is that Billy at first made many of these opportunities for me to "confide." But, then, when I failed of advantage in them, with the temper

of the just judge considering the case of a loved but stubborn culprit, who must reach happiness through sorrow, he no longer made it easy for me. Though I do not say, of course, that Billy reached any of those conclusions by argument. With him I think it was that intelligence from above with which children are born, and which we would do better to let alone to go to its natural death in the holocaust of the world rather than hasten to its destruction because it is "childish."

WHO TWISTED THE KNIFE—

ONE day a flock of the very birds I had used to kill rose before us.

"We could get two or three out of that bunch, papa dear, couldn't we —if we had the gun?"

We! I grew very warm at this renewed twisting of the knife, and answered him nothing.

The little boy twisted it again:

"Don't you wish we had the gun?"

"No!" I said terribly.

He was shocked to a pleased silence for a moment.

This was evidently good, but it did not go far enough. Billy must know what I would not yet tell. He went on heroically:

"That's always the way" — he quoted a gunner's aphorism — "No gun, game plenty. Game plenty, no gun!"

He had pushed me to the wall at last. I took him so savagely by his thin, beautiful little shoulders that terror flew to his eyes. I made him to face me. I think in that moment he feared his first physical chastisement. Perhaps he had gone too far with me? Perhaps he had been impudent?

"Papa," he said, "I am sorry!"

"Boy," I said, "we shall never

again kill anything God made. Do you understand?"

For a moment he could not believe. Then he smiled, laughed, and, with his laughter, plentiful tears streamed down his dear face. For a long time we stood there, Billy struggling chokingly with his laughter and sobs for some of the words which must have poured from his heart too thickly for his lips; I, awkward, as if I stood in the presence of an august being I yearned for, but must not approach without invitation until I had been judged. I cannot now remember who first did it. But presently with Billy and me it was "arms all 'round," as we used to call it. And, though I

could not subdue my pride sufficiently to say so, and have not even to this day, Billy, happy as he was, was not so happy as I.

For Billy was mine again, and I was his, for so little a price! and we both knew that it would be always so now.

"Papa dear, le — let us gi — go up there and — ti — talk, papa *dear*, 'confide'!"

He dragged me by the arm up to the top of the bit hillock where I had flung the dead bird that day. And more and more I knew by the sure clutch of the little hand on my arm — oh, you know that grip of sure loving possession? — I hope so! — that Billy

"It was 'arms all 'round'"

and I were one and inseparable forever and ever!

The hillock was crowned with splendid flowers and grasses; the sun was setting at its back; the sea spread before it in pink to the blue and green sky; and the perfume of the wild roses in the meadows afar back had come to seek the sea! It was such a spot that Billy, or happy fate, chose for our "confiding."

I was so glad that I did not scruple to begin with laughter:

"Billy-Boy," I said, "you played a hard game. You never once made it easy for me — as I do for you when we are to confide."

"I did n't know how, papa dear,"

mourned Billy, nestling to me. "I could n't. I tried — 'deed I did! If you had only — only — oh, I dunno what! I was bovvered awful! I was n't nice to you, was I?"

"As nice as I deserved, I suppose."

I laughed again, kissing the top of Billy's head where it projected through my circling arm.

"Now, will you go first, or shall I?" For that was the manner of our confiding — to first agree upon a basis of procedure.

"I dess I better go first," said Billy, generously — for by our code, strictly pursued, it was my duty to open.

"Well," I said, not to be outdone in generosity by my antagonist, "I

think you may, though I ought, for you have made up the case against me and know it better than I do, even if I suspect it pretty thoroughly."

Billy went on, almost solemnly:

"Well, you see, papa dear, I asked mama how many little birdies you had killed and she said she did not know. But I made her think. So I said, 'Was it a thousand?' Mama said, 'Oh, yes!' And I said, 'Two thousand, mama?' And she said, 'Yes, perhaps two thousand.'"

"I'm afraid, Boy," I said, "that mama was very lenient. It is more than that."

But he did not seek to convict me of the deeper offence. He was gentle

now — neither judge nor accuser, but comforter — Billy! Instead, he raced on, unloading his heart, as I had taught him to do.

"Well, that is what made me ill. I could n't help thinking about it in the dark. And I *did* see things — like you said. I saw all those two thousand little birdies. Oh, it was such a flock! And then I had to think about them all stopping chattering in the tree — that 's how I saw them — and falling dead on the ground, and my papa — and me — there with the pretty gun. They were such little things, and you and me were so big! Nothing is so nice and pretty as a birdie, is it, papa?"

"Nothing," I said.

"And they sing for us!"

"Yes."

"And they never hurt a thing!"

"Not a thing."

"Don't you love to see them flying — almost up to the sky?"

"Yes."

"Papa, God must like 'em — to let 'em do that!"

"Yes, I think He does."

"And so easy — easy — easy! No boy nor man can do that, can they?"

"No," I said, "the wisest men on earth have tried to do it — they have even tried to find out how the birds do it. But God has kept their secret. They have all failed. I think God

will always keep the secret of the birds, and that men will never be able to fly as they do."

"Go on, papa! Tell me more stuff about that!" cried the enraptured little boy.

But I had to confess that he had heard all I knew about flying—either by men or birds.

"Besides," I said, "are n't we getting away from the case on trial?"

Billy did not even smile as he at once resumed it.

"That 's where the *life* comes in, papa dear. One minute a birdie is flying in the sky as light as cotton. Then some one shoots little bullets through it and it falls like lead.

That's the *life*, papa, isn't it, that goes out through the little bullet-holes?"

"Y–yes," I said.

"And that goes away, away, somewhere, mebby back to God?"

"Perhaps," I choked.

"And then the little birdie's just like a stone!"

"Yes."

"And how fast, fast they fly!"

"The fastest bird," I said wisely, glad to get away from Billy's terrible speculations upon life, "goes faster than anything men have yet made."

"Faster than a railroad train?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And then, when they're shot, all

that life goes out and they stop and fall just like this!"

He smote his pink hands together in illustration.

"Papa, what *is* the life?"

"Well, Billy," I wavered, "I don't think any one knows. That is God's secret too."

"And birds are such happy little things, papa dear. And round. And their feathers are so beautiful and fit so well. I don't believe people could make feathers!"

"Nor I," I admitted.

He was quite out of breath and stopped to recover.

"That 's why I could n't sleep."

"And was that all? Is it *all* out?"

"Yes — honist, papa."

"And you will get well now?"

"Oh, yes, papa dear! I *am* well!"

"The birds will never have a braver champion," said I.

"It was n't the birdies — all," said Billy, so quickly that I knew he meant to correct some misunderstanding of mine.

"What then?" I asked.

"You, papa dear."

"Thank you, Boy," I said. "We shall not need to bother about that any more. I've reformed."

"I know," said Billy, "and I'm sorry it hurts you. But it used to hurt me when you'd kill things. Papa, sometimes I was n't ill. But then I

did n't have to go out with you and kill."

"I forgive you," I smiled, a bit sadly, I fear.

Billy kissed me.

"Papa," he said, "to-night I'll kiss you good-night, too. Shall I tell you more stuff?"

"Yes — everything. We must cleanse the little heart."

"I did n't know that you are as nice as you are!"

I laughed and proved to Billy-Boy just how nice I could be.

"But I guess I was n't very nice to you. Mebby if I had told you not to kill the birds — that it hurts me in here —" he put both his small hands

against his chest — "you would n't have?"

"Do anything to hurt Billy? Certainly not!"

"Then," he said oracularly, "it is all my fault."

I let him have the comfort of thinking himself a fellow criminal with me.

"Well, say *our* fault?"

"Yes. So I went and found that one — you know — up here on this hill — and buried it in a little grave, with sticks around to keep the snakes out. When we go home I'll show you. Oh, I did n't tell you something else!"

"Tell me quickly!" I cried. "You must play fair!"

But do you observe that I was telling the little boy nothing? And that he generously remitted that?

"Well, one night when I could n't sleep, I thought that I was n't much better nor bigger nor stronger than a birdie. And I know I 'm not so pretty. Well, there are giants. To a giant I am just as little account as a bird or an ant — mebby. And what would *you* think if some giant would come along some day before I could get out of his way and step on me — and not even know it — just walk on? And I wondered how I 'd feel. It would hurt me dreadfully, would n't it? And, papa, you 'd hate him! He so big and me so little! And mebby he 'd step

on me just for fun. That is the way people do to ants. And laugh! Papa, would n't you hate the giant?"

"If any giant should hurt you, Boy, he would have to settle with me, though he were as tall as a church steeple!" I said.

"I knew it! Big things have no business to kill little things! They ought to take care of them — like you do of me. Oh, yes! And, papa, you would n't like *me* to kill birdies, would you?"

"Boy — Boy — Boy," I cried, crushing him to me, "no!"

"No. You have told me not to kill things!"

Billy seemed to think a moment

very seriously. Then he said: "I guess that's all, papa dear. And I won't put no chair behind the door to-night, and you may sit on my bed and tell me sleepy stories."

WHO TOOK ME HOME WITH HIM —

THEN we went homeward. It was quite evening. The sun was nearly gone. The air was saffron — the sea. We seemed to be walking straight into the great yellow disk already half below the waters. The path was strewn with wild rose leaves. The breeze was nectar. Billy and I were at peace, and all the earth seemed with us. When we neared the porch he leaped upon my shoulder and shouted so lustily that she who looked anxiously for

us both came smiling to the door at once, and at once understood. The doctor was with her. He wisely felt the little boy's pulse and made him put out his tongue.

"A perfect recovery," he said. "It is wonderful — wonderful, what sunshine will do. He was really a very sick boy. I don't think I need to come again."

"Does he, Boy?" asked I.

"No," laughed the little boy, with his arms close about my neck and a confidential hug; for he, too, understood.

Then, when the doctor was gone:

"Oh, I nearly forgot!" cried Billy.

He said nothing more, but led me

by the hand into the garden. At last we came to a small green place he had fenced about with sticks. Inside was a tiny mound. At each end of it were small slabs of wood which he had shaved with the kitchen knife into rude shapes of gravestones. I noticed that they were void of letters, which Billy began to know.

"Papa," whispered the little boy, "take off your hat, please."

I did so. He had taken off his cap long before.

"Pardon me, Billy dear," I said, a strange choking in my throat.

Billy said nothing. But I heard his voice break in a sob as he tried to speak. He was on his knees at the

small green spot. And, I hesitate to confess it, but I dropped to my knees beside Billy and took him in my arms. You see, you have never been me, nor had a Billy-Boy, or I would not have to be ashamed to confess that.

"Papa, aren't we sorry for the poor birdie?" whispered Billy.

Do you observe that the little boy said "We"?

I told him that we were, using the pronoun he had chosen — glad to do so.

"I knew you would be. So I went and found it, and we won't have to be sorry for — *that* — papa dear."

"Thank you, Billy," I said huskily.

"I wish we had all of those two thousand, papa dear."

"I do, too, Billy."

He apologized for the blankness of the tombstone:

"I did n't know exactly what to put on it —"

But then he remembered to be perfectly frank, as we had long ago agreed to be with each other.

"No, that is n't right, papa dear. I did it when we — we — did n't love each other. And I could n't say 'Died the twenty-ninth day of June,' and so on, for 'died' is what we say of the things God kills. And He has the right, I expect — though I don't see why *He* should kill things He makes.

And I didn't like to say 'killed,' even if we didn't love each other then. Killed means murder. Anyhow, don't you think God understands?"

"Yes," I said, and wished that He might forgive as He understood.

"That's why they put the names, and so forth, on tombstones — so that God understands. And don't you remember that in the Testament about not a sparrow falling down on the ground except God sees him? And a snipe is just as nice as a sparrow — don't you think?"

AND TOOK THE CHAIR FROM BEHIND THE DOOR—

THAT night, indeed, the little boy did not put a chair behind his door. And I kissed him good-night for the first time in two weeks. And he kissed me three times back—as though to say in that opulent fashion that all was fair forever between us. And then, that there might be no doubt to keep me waking, he called me back and kissed me again, winding his soft arms and legs about me in what he supposed a leviathan garroting.

And this time I might not go till I had told him a sleepy story of a strange man who nearly lost his little boy's love, and a curious little boy who nearly lost his father's love, because they did not quite understand the workings of the little beating thing in the breast called a "heart," nor the wonders of another thing called the "soul." So that each had to turn his heart inside out to the other, until each knew its workings and confided many things until they knew better the wonders of the soul. After that there was no more danger, because they would always do that when they did not understand.

Little Billy's eyes had already

closed. But he tore them open to shout happily:

"Why, that's me!"

"You?" said I, very happily.

"And you, papa!"

Then Billy, indeed, slept.

I watched him a moment. And if you had known Billy you would have watched him, too. You could n't have helped it. And that is another picture I have of Billy — his sleeping. Perhaps it is the dearest. I wonder whether any one ever watched me as I slept? I wonder if I ever was worth it? I am certain I was not as well worth it as Billy. Are you?

. . . . . .

And now we go out together every day. In fact, Billy is disconsolate if we cannot. And I am mad for it. But we won't even pull the flowers — for fear it will hurt them.

"For we don't know, do we, papa dear?" says Billy.

And I answer:

"No, we don't know."

Do you?

And it is sweeter that way, even if we did know.

"We're just as happy with each other," comforts Billy.

And I answer yes, though I am not just as happy — I am happier.